United Nations S/PV.5206

Security Council

Sixtieth year

Provisional

5206th meeting

Friday, 17 June 2005, 10.20 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. De La Sablière	(France)
Members:	Algeria	Mr. Benmehidi
	Argentina	Mr. Mayoral
	Benin	Mr. Zinsou
	Brazil	Mr. Sardenberg
	China	Mr. Zhang Yishan
	Denmark	Ms. Løj
	Greece	Mr. Vassilakis
	Japan	Mr. Oshima
	Philippines	Ms. Taguiang
	Romania	Mr. Motoc
	Russian Federation	Mr. Denisov
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Emyr Jones Parry
	United Republic of Tanzania	Mr. Manongi
	United States of America	Mrs. Patterson

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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05-38973 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in French*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, and in the absence of objection, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Prendergast: Let me begin this month's briefing by reporting that, in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, the parties are slowly, and not without difficulty, meeting to coordinate the implementation of Israel's initiative to withdraw from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank. Confidence-building measures are also being discussed. In the next few days, Prime Minister Sharon and President Abbas will meet to discuss the situation. We hope that they will work together to drive forward the process of coordination and confidence-building. Those developments are indicative of the hopeful trend that we have spoken of since the beginning of the year, but there are other trends too. Renewed violence and the low level of mutual trust continue to work against progress. Militants on both sides remain strong, and they exert much influence politically.

The recent marked increase in diplomatic activity continued over the past month. Both Israeli and Palestinian leaders met with senior United States policy-makers. On 25 May, the Palestinian and United States Presidents held their first meeting since the election of President Abbas, in January this year. A range of other representatives of the international community have already visited, or will soon visit, the region, among them Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and others. Our own new United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Alvaro de Soto, has taken up his post in the region, and I expect that he will brief the Council next month on his first impressions.

The international community has used these visits and meetings to convey a consistent message to both Palestinians and Israelis. It is one of commitment to the vision and framework articulated in the road map, which was endorsed by the Council in resolution 1515 (2003), and of belief that both parties must implement the obligations elaborated in the road map. We are asking the parties to do everything possible to ensure that the upcoming Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank becomes a step in a broader process and is used as a springboard to revitalize the road map.

To assist in this pressing immediate goal of withdrawal, the Quartet's Special Envoy for Gaza Disengagement, Mr. James Wolfensohn, arrived in the region on 7 June and began his work with the parties and other actors. Mr. Wolfensohn is continuing to develop a rapid action programme aimed at bringing about immediate and tangible economic change for the better for Palestinians not just in Gaza but throughout the occupied Palestinian territory. He is working energetically with Israelis and Palestinians to encourage them to coordinate Israel's withdrawal from and handover of the relevant areas. He has stated his conviction — which we share wholeheartedly — that security for Israelis and economic development for Palestinians go hand in hand, and that both are required to ensure the successful implementation of Israel's withdrawal plan.

Each of us should do whatever we can to support and encourage the parties to move forward. However, rebuilding the trust and mutual confidence that are needed if real and sustainable progress is to be achieved requires sustained and direct contacts between the parties themselves.

In that context, I am glad to note that Israelis and Palestinians have continued to meet to discuss the economic and civilian aspects of Israel's withdrawal. Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie and Vice Prime Minister Shimon Peres on 21 May discussed the coordination of the withdrawal initiative as well as broader efforts

aimed at resuscitating the peace process between the two parties. A variety of other bilateral meetings have also taken place to discuss questions such as the assets of settlements and their eventual fate. Israelis and Palestinians have agreed to continue their coordination on security matters at the ministerial, planning and operational levels. According to the United States Security Coordinator, Lieutenant General Ward, an improved atmosphere and increased willingness to engage in coordination have characterized the cooperative efforts in recent weeks. On the Palestinian side, an integrated team comprising top-level personnel from the three security services has been set up, and planning is proceeding based on a timeline provided by the Israeli side.

There has been some progress on the implementation of the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings reached between the parties in February. On 29 May, the Israeli cabinet approved the release of an additional 400 Palestinian prisoners pursuant to the understandings, and on 2 June, 398 prisoners were released. There are reports that the Israeli Government intends to hand over to Palestinian security control the West Bank cities of Qalqilyah, Bethlehem and Ramallah prior to Israel's withdrawal.

Such actions and developments are to be encouraged. Slow, steady movement forward seems to be under way. However, it is our hope that the meeting between Prime Minister Sharon and President Abbas will be used by the parties to overcome difficulties that have arisen in order to accelerate the positive momentum and achieve the full implementation of outstanding commitments. Again I stress that dialogue and cooperation between the two sides are of crucial importance not only in preparation for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank but also in the broader context of reinvigorating progress towards the realization of the two-State vision.

In Israel, opponents of disengagement still voice their opposition to Israel's prospective withdrawal and resort to protests, demonstrations and, in some cases, acts of sabotage and civil disobedience. In spite of that, the Government is pressing ahead with its plans to relocate the evacuated settlers and remains committed to the full and timely implementation of its initiative. On 9 June, the Israeli High Court of Justice turned down a legal challenge directed against the disengagement initiative.

The Palestinian Authority still faces a number of serious internal challenges, which have deepened partly as a result of the Palestinian Authority's efforts to institute comprehensive security reform. In a protest against the decision to restructure the security forces, on 2 June hundreds of Palestinian military intelligence forces went on a rampage in the Gaza Strip, blocking main roads and storming public buildings, including that of the Palestinian Legislative Council. A number of shooting incidents occurred, and on 3 June, the Director General of the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Religious Affairs and his brother were killed when gunmen fired at their car near Nablus.

In earlier incidents connected to last month's municipal elections, violence erupted on 18 May, following a court ruling the day before which abrogated election results in some municipalities. Reruns of some municipal elections in Gaza were delayed on 31 May amidst high tension between Palestinian factions, as Hamas declared its intention to boycott the poll and its result.

Those developments are deeply disturbing. The Palestinian Authority needs all possible support to confront those challenges. I am glad to report that the work of Lieutenant General Ward is continuing, and we welcome the expansion of his responsibilities to include, in addition to Palestinian security sector reform, security coordination in preparation for the Israeli withdrawal. The Palestinian Authority's Ministry of the Interior has put together a planning team composed of representatives from the military and civilian police, civil defence, intelligence and national security, which, in conjunction with a team of international experts, is preparing for Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank. While preparations for the withdrawal are the priority, we hope that this work will also contribute to improving the internal state of law and order in areas under Palestinian Authority control and to ensuring the rule of law for all Palestinians.

Against the backdrop of increased internal challenges and disorder, violence between Palestinians and Israelis continued over the past month to pose a serious threat to the safety and security of both peoples as well as to the viability of the overall process of moving forward.

I want to express our particular concern over the serious escalation in rocket and mortar attacks by

Palestinian militants against Israeli targets. Starting on 18 May, a two-day barrage of Qassam rockets, mortar shells and anti-tank rockets was launched at various Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip. Mortar and Qassam rocket fire against settlements and Israeli cities close to the Gaza Strip has continued since then to occur at a lower level of intensity. Most recently, on 7 and 8 June, another two-day volley of Qassams and mortars was launched by Palestinian militants at Gaza Strip settlements and at the Israeli town of Sderot. Tragically, three civilians were killed — two Palestinians and one Chinese citizen — all of whom were working in the Gush Katif settlement block in southern Gaza; five Palestinians labourers were also wounded. The casualties illustrate the indiscriminate nature of these violent attacks.

Violence has claimed lives elsewhere and has underscored how fragile the situation continues to be. On 31 May, Israeli soldiers shot dead a Palestinian who tried to stab them in the West Bank town of Hebron. On 7 June, a Palestinian militant and an unarmed Palestinian policeman were shot and killed in an exchange of fire that erupted in a village near the West Bank city of Jenin as Israeli troops were trying to arrest the militant. One Israeli soldier and six Palestinians were wounded during the operation.

During the reporting period, there has been a resumption of the Israeli practice of targeting from the air Palestinian militants engaged in suspicious activity. I would like to remind both sides of the need to take special care to protect innocent civilians, in accordance with international and humanitarian law.

To date, despite the serious nature of these various incidents, a prolonged breakdown of the calm of the past four months has been averted. There is evidence of a serious effort on the Palestinian side to maintain the calm and, on the Israeli side, of determination not to overreact to isolated incidents. We are concerned, however, by the statements of Palestinian factions that they might see themselves as no longer bound by their earlier pledge to maintain a ceasefire. We expect the Palestinian Authority to exert greater efforts to impose its authority on all Palestinian groups, including the militants, to establish law and order, to ensure the endurance of the current ceasefire and to guarantee an end to all violence. It is our hope that the Palestinian Authority, despite recent statements by Palestinian officials suggesting otherwise, will not waver in its commitment to end all violence and institute calm as well as law and order, as it is obliged to do under the road map and the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings.

At the same time, and as the Palestinians point out, Israel could and should do more to strengthen the ability of the Palestinian Authority to carry out its responsibilities. Frequent and direct security coordination, in addition to the implementation of confidence-building measures, would assist President Abbas in his efforts to establish control and exercise the effective monopoly on the use of force that is a chief characteristic of State and proto-State authorities. The Palestinian Authority must act to fulfil its obligations to end violence and terror, but full support is needed from Israel and the international community.

Like the Palestinian Authority, Israel has road map obligations to meet. One of its primary obligations — and an important confidence-building measure — is the requirement to halt all settlement activity, including natural growth, and to dismantle settlement outposts erected since March 2001. We repeat our concern at the fact that Israel is not living up to its obligations in that respect. In that connection, we take note with regret of the publication on 2 June of tenders for the construction of 22 housing units in the West Bank settlement of Maale Adumim.

As with continued settlement activity, Israel's ongoing construction of the barrier remains a source of deep concern. The route it follows encroaches upon Palestinian land and interests and threatens to prejudge unilaterally eventual bilateral negotiations between the parties. I should mention in that connection that the Secretary-General is now in the process of administrative and budgetary preparations to establish the register of damage, as he outlined in his letter of 17 January to the President of the General Assembly. We hope to report further on the establishment of that registry in the coming weeks.

We understand that both sides have domestic concerns and demands to address. But that cannot distract our attention from the parties' responsibilities to each other. On the contrary: failure to build mutual trust now would only compound the already existing difficulties. We were therefore relieved to note press reports that demolition orders issued for 88 houses in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Silwan would not be carried out.

Democracy is a key ingredient of a strong and legitimate Palestinian Authority. On 17 May, the Palestinian Legislative Council passed a new election law, enlarging the body to 132 members and envisaging their election according to a 2-to-1 ratio from districts and from national lists. However, on 3 June, President Abbas issued a decree postponing *sine die* the legislative elections set earlier for 17 July and referring to the need for a new electoral law that would introduce at least 50 per cent proportional representation. It is still intended to hold the elections before the end of this year. The United Nations and others continue to assist the Central Elections Commission in preparing for what, it is hoped, will be a free and fair process.

I turn now to the situation in Lebanon. On 2 June, the prominent Lebanese journalist Samir Qassir was brutally murdered by a car bomb. The Secretary-General condemned the act and called on the Lebanese Government to bring to justice the perpetrators and the instigators of that terrible crime and to ensure the continuation of press freedom and an end to impunity. In addition, the Council, as members will recall, issued a statement (S/PRST/2005/22) condemning the heinous killing of Mr. Qassir.

Over the past month, there has been one significant incident involving an exchange of fire across the Blue Line. On 21 May, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) opened small-arms fire to warn off Lebanese shepherds who had violated the Blue Line in the Shaba'a farms area. Local Lebanese reported that three houses in Shaba'a village had been hit. Subsequently, Hizbullah fired several artillery and mortar rounds towards IDF positions in the area, stating that it was in retaliation for the IDF fire. The IDF responded with artillery, tank and mortar fire, with rounds impacting in the area between Abbasiyah and Kafr Shuba. No casualties were reported.

On 4 June, the Lebanese security forces reported that they had discovered and removed a Katyusha rocket in the vicinity of Addaysseh village. The rocket was reportedly set in a firing position and was located only about two kilometres from the Blue Line. We commend the vigilance of the authorities in that respect, and we trust that it will continue. Meanwhile, Israeli warplanes have continued to violate the Blue Line and Lebanese airspace, although such violations appear to have been less frequent.

I would like to say that during this very delicate period, not just in Lebanon, but also in the wider region, it is imperative that all concerned exercise the utmost restraint and maintain calm along the Blue Line. The danger of escalation remains very real so long as violations of the Blue Line continue. We wish to remind all parties that all hostile acts must stop and that one violation does not justify another.

In the past month, the United Nations has continued its assistance to Lebanon. Mr. Detlev Mehlis, head of the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission, arrived in Beirut on 26 May. He immediately began discussions with the Lebanese authorities regarding the operations of the Commission and concluded with them this week a memorandum of understanding. Since his arrival, Mr. Mehlis and his team have been reviewing the materials and evidence collected by other investigations and inquiries. Yesterday, as members know, the Secretary-General wrote to the Security Council informing it that the Commission was fully operational as of today. As requested in resolution 1595 (2005), we will keep the Council informed of the progress of the Commission's work.

Meanwhile, since early May, United Nations electoral experts from the Electoral Assistance Division have been providing technical assistance to the Lebanese authorities for the current parliamentary elections as well as support to ensure coordination among international electoral observers. Their assessment is that, from a technical perspective, the elections have been well conducted.

This coming Sunday, the parliamentary electoral process in Lebanon will be completed. It is a major achievement for Lebanon to have held elections on time. As the Secretary-General has pointed out, those elections constitute a major opportunity for the Lebanese people to shape their own future, to strengthen political institutions and to restore their full sovereignty. Therefore, to ensure their successful conclusion, we call on all concerned parties to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and to cease any actions that could be destabilizing.

The summer of 2005 will mark an important crossroads. As we have stated consistently here over the past year, we hope that the road that leads towards peace and security for all will be chosen, rather than the one that leads back into despair, confrontation and

conflict. But for that to happen, the parties need, as a first step, to intensify their efforts to ensure that Israeli withdrawal is implemented successfully and peacefully. Cooperation in that effort would not only be of value in and of itself; it could also help to build confidence between the parties so that they can tackle the issues that face them in the broader process of negotiations that must follow. Building mutual confidence is crucial if the parties are to walk together the path that is laid out for them in the road map, which remains the most broadly accepted peace plan. The objective must remain an end to the occupation that began in 1967, the realization of the two-State solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive regional peace in the Middle East. We cannot afford to lose sight of that objective, no matter how long and hard the path is towards it.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank Mr. Prendergast for his briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I should now like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.45 a.m.